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A Gothic Heterotopia: Four Anglophone Responses to Venice

Abstract: Starting from the view of the cultural geographer, Doreen Massey, that it is necessary to 'move beyond a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity', this article argues that places change in time, because the physical environment changes, especially in the Age of the Anthropocene, and because they are the product of imaginatively conceived collective fictions. It takes the view that outsiders invariably construct heterotopian visions of places, often drawing on past imaginaries and that Venice has habitually been cognitively perceived through Gothic lenses, in which past, present and future intermingle. It pursues this line of thinking in relation to four Anglophone representations of Venice: the recent film *A Haunting in Venice* (2023), directed by Kenneth Branagh and scripted by Michael Green, which is very loosely adapted from Agatha Christie's *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), and which subjects the whodunnit genre to a Gothic makeover, Daphne du Maurier's short story 'Don't Look Now' (1971) and Nicolas Roeg's film adaptation (1973) of it, in which the Gothic particularly manifests itself in the form of psychic precognition, and Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019), in which an ostensibly realistic novel is infiltrated by recurrent paranormal elements, several of which are occasioned by the 'unnaturalness' of climate change.

Keywords: *Heterotopia; Venice; Gothic; Branagh,* A Haunting in Venice*; du Maurier, 'Don't Look Now'; Roeg,* Don't Look Now*; Ghosh,* Gun Island.

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Places change. In the words of the cultural geographer, Doreen Massey, 'social relations are never still; they are 'inherently dynamic', and so it is necessary to 'move beyond a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity' (Massey 2). Places are fluid and change *in time* because the physical environment changes, especially in the Age of the Anthropocene. They also change because they are cognitively perceived, and they take on particular identities, when viewed from outside. They become the products of shared fictions, which are often at odds with contemporary realities. Egypt is the land of the pyramids. Never mind the upheavals of the fellaheen revolution and the Arab Spring. Paris will always be the city of Romance. Never mind the traffic jams, the garbage, the *gilets jaunes*. Outsiders invariably construct heterotopian visions of places, often drawing on past imaginaries.

I would like to pursue this line of thinking in relation to four Anglophone representations of Venice. Venice is, to state the obvious, one of the most extraordinary cities in the world, a city built on water, which immediately suggests it has an amphibious, unfixed identity. Venice is a city where past and present come together at every juncture. Historically, in the words of Caryl Phillips, in *The European Tribe*, it was 'the New York of the Renaissance, controlling the whole of the Western world' (Phillips 45). To this, one should add that Venice's sphere of influence extended to North Africa and Asia; it was a crossroads of cultures, 'Christian Europe's most important interface with the Muslim civilizations of the Near East' (Carboni *et al*., 'Venice and the Islamic World') and a place where Judaism was allocated a dedicated enclave, albeit with strict rules of subordination imposed by the Republic. Even Shakespeare, whose Italian geography can be very subjective,[1] knew enough to people Venice with figures such as Shylock and Othello. And, of course, today this diversity continues. Amid the tourists who flock to Venice from all corners of the globe, the local workforce includes increasing numbers of recent and not-so-recent migrants from Asia and Africa. One of the writers I will be discussing, Amitav Ghosh, speaks of hearing his native Bengali spoken everywhere he went in Venice.[2]

I will try to characterise the way four Anglophone writers and film-makers have represented Venice. In each of the four works I will be discussing, the Gothic and the paranormal are to the fore, particularly in chronotopes that upset the discreteness of time and place. Gothic is, of course, among other things, both an architectural style and an artistic mode in which the imagination is unleashed into the realms of fantasy and terror. As Ruskin put it, in his chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice*, 'Gothic architecture has external forms and internal elements' (Ruskin 2:181), and external and internal manifestations of Gothic come together in the works I will be discussing. They are the film *A Haunting in Venice* (2023), directed by Kenneth Branagh,

[1] In *The Tempest*, Milan is seen as a seaport. *Two Gentlemen of Verona* has a journey from Verona to Milan being undertaken by sea.
[2] Ghosh, In Venice I Heard Bangla'.

which is very loosely adapted from Agatha Christie's *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), Daphne du Maurier's short story 'Don't Look Now' (1971), Nicolas Roeg's brilliant film adaptation (1973) of du Maurier's story, and Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019). I will consider both versions of 'Don't Look Now', but only the film of *A Haunting in Venice*, because the novel from which it supposedly derives quite simply is not set in Venice. The decision to locate the film's action in Venice is, though, a fascinating shift. So, a few words about this.

Prior to collaborating on *A Haunting in Venice*, Branagh and the scriptwriter Michael Green had worked together on adaptations of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) and *Death on the Nile* (2022). Like these two films, *A Haunting in Venice* is adapted from a Hercule Poirot mystery, but there any resemblance with its predecessors more or less ends. *Hallowe'en Party* is not, as was the case with the novels from which the earlier two films were taken, set in an exotic overseas location: its corpses meet their ends in a sleepy English village. Sleepy, that is, except for its having more than its fair share of murders in its otherwise quaintly respectable middle-class milieu. And in *Hallowe'en Party*, from the outset we know there is something rotten in this superficially tranquil English village. In this case, the initial murder that Poirot has to investigate takes place at a teenagers' Halloween party and, as in numerous Christie novels, the house setting conveniently ensures that there is a closed circle of suspects. So, when Poirot is called in to join up the dots, we know that the mystery will be solved and order restored, leaving him free to attend to other cases where the glue of a superficially cohesive social world has come unstuck.

To accompany the release of the film, a new edition of the novel was published. It carries the title *A Haunting in Venice*, though it reprints the exact text of *Hallowe'en Party*, which does not even mention Venice. This new edition includes a cursory acknowledgement of *Hallowe'en Party* on its cover, but this does little to indicate the radical make-over that the novel has undergone in the film. What's more, it's not just that there's no Venice in *A Haunting in Venice*; there's also very little haunting. So, any readers hoping to enjoy grand guignol frissons in the romantic setting of La Serenissima are doubly let down. While the novel has neither a haunting nor Venice, the movie has both, and Branagh and Green have taken just one or two details from the novel. There is a children's Halloween party in its opening frames, but this is interlaced with elements from Venetian Carnival and the action swiftly moves on to a more obvious adult engagement with haunting. The hostess of the party, the former operatic soprano, Rowena Drake, has invited a medium to conduct a séance in the decaying Palazzo that she owns. Through the séance she hopes to make contact with her dead daughter, Alicia, who has supposedly committed suicide a year before, though from the outset there is a strong suspicion that Alicia has been murdered and it is not long before the medium herself is killed, because she appears to have divined the murderer's identity and to have been blackmailing them. So, a darker mood hangs over *A Haunting in Venice* and the film is as much an unnerving Gothic farrago as a murder mystery in the usual Christie manner. Poirot will, of course, solve the case in *A Haunting in Venice*, but along the way his

methodology is thrown into question and several factors suggest that a paranormal agency is at work. There is, then, a tension between the belief that logical deduction will solve the various mysteries and Gothic elements that challenge Poirot's empirical methods of investigation.

Transferring the setting to a dark and haunted Venetian palace makes for a major shift of genre. The way in which the Palazzo is rendered creates an atmosphere that is at odds with the conventions of Christie's crime fiction. Poirot's deductive reasoning is challenged by evidence that suggests that the normal laws of physics have been suspended. So, in addition to laying bare the motivations of the various suspects and solving both the original murder and two more that follow, Poirot has to contend with a situation in which there may be more need for a ghostbuster than a detective. The film deploys an assemblage of apparently paranormal phenomena – spirits, ghosts and clairvoyancy among them. In the past the Palazzo has been an orphanage and it is said to be haunted by the ghosts of children who were locked up and left to die at the time of the plague and now seek revenge on the doctors and nurses who abandoned them. This legend is played out, during the film's Halloween party, in an eerie shadow play, and so before the main action gets underway, a heady mix of elements from Halloween, Carnival, and ghostly puppet theatre, as well as the prospect of the séance, have been brought together to suggest the imminence of otherworldly activity. And lest we fail to realise that Gothic is paramount, during the Halloween revelry a precocious boy, Leopold, the son of the family doctor, Leslie Ferrier, is found reading Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.

As in the novel *Hallowe'en Party*, Poirot has an associate, Ariadne Oliver, a Christie-like writer who appears in several of the Poirot novels, sometimes providing a metafictive commentary on the action. Here she throws down the gauntlet to a semi-retired Poirot when, in the opening sequence, she challenges him to expose the fraudulence of the medium, 'The "Unholy" Miss Reynolds' (*Haunting* 00.05.47 – 00.06.03). Ariadne says she is convinced she is fake, but she has not been able to unmask her and appeals to Poirot to do so in the expectation that he will fail, an outcome which will provide her with a compelling subject for a new novel, which she envisages entitling *The Woman Who Stumped Hercule Poirot*.

The year is 1947 and, in addition to the general sense that Venice's glories lie in the past, an atmosphere of post-war gloom hangs over the opening scenes, where Poirot is seen literally cultivating his own garden, and Ariadne links him with the city, when she tells him Venice is a 'gorgeous relic, slowly sinking into the sea just like your mind without a challenge', and says that he has 'walled himself up into retirement' (00.04.25 – 00.04.29). The analogy is fascinating, since it challenges Poirot to make sense of the multiple mysteries of Venice, where, as one of the characters puts it, 'every house is haunted or cursed' (00.07.35 – 00.07.39), as well as exposing Miss Reynolds. The latter task is fairly easily accomplished – Poirot realizes that one of her assistants is up a chimney using a magnet to make a typewriter tap out answers to her questions – but other elements are less easily resolved. The real mystery lies deeper and involves discovering

who killed Alicia and who has been involved in blackmailing the murderer. Stirred from his initial silence, Poirot duly solves the case, but not without having to consider whether paranormal forces are at work, since he has hallucinatory experiences, including a vision of the dead Alicia, as a result of being drugged. And when two of the characters, the doctor Leslie Ferrier and Miss Reynolds, subsequently die, there is the suggestion that the dead children may be achieving the revenge they seek on those who abandoned them during the plague – Ferrier is a doctor; Miss Reynolds has served as a nurse during the war. Finally, of course, Poirot solves the case and identifies the murderer, who turns out to be Rowena, and the blackmailer, who is revealed to be the boy Leopold, but, although a new day dawns at the end and the survivors are released from the darkness of the imprisoning Palazzo, the Gothic mood music has had a more powerful effect than the logical resolution of the mystery of the crimes.

Visually, the film is classic Gothic. It opens with drab scenes of a damp, misty Venice, bird-splattered statues, ghostly gondolas and screeching, warring pigeons. Subsequently, when the action moves inside the palace, chiaroscuro is the order of the claustrophobic night. Naked flames from wall-mounted candles tantalise the audience with a partial view of the nocturnal goings on in the palace. A violent storm rages outside, ensuring the closed circle of suspects will remain together and isolated throughout the night. And accompanying all of this, the often-atonal musical score by Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir creates and sustains a mood of gathering uneasy suspense, from which there is no release until the final credits roll to the strains of Vera Lynn's 'When the Lights Go On Again' and the audience is released into the mundane world of defeated post-World War II Italy.

Plot, setting, lighting, weather, musical score. The various elements of its *mise en scène* combine together to make *A Haunting in Venice* a phantasmagoric film, in which the Gothic elements eclipse the perfunctory framework of the Christie whodunnit. More than just this: the tug-of war between Gothic and whodunnit raises existential issues when Poirot is drawn into conversations in which supposed evidence of paranormal activity challenges his essentially atheistic viewpoint. Early on, just before the séance, in a conversation with Miss Reynolds in which he denounces spiritualism, Poirot speaks of his loss of faith, adding that he would welcome any evidence of the 'soul's endurance after death', because this would validate a belief in God and a moral universe founded on 'meaning, order, justice' (00.16.47 – 00.17.12). His voice sounds authoritative, but his view is thrown into doubt, when, immediately after he utters these words, a ceiling chandelier crashes to the ground, as it were offering a disapproving sign from on high. Shortly afterwards, when Miss Reynolds has apparently spoken with Alicia's voice at the séance, Ariadne says, 'how incredible to believe, to know the world has mystery, a God who cares enough to make abiding souls', to which Poirot replies that there is 'nothing' after death (00.29.51 – 00.29.59). He has exposed Miss Reynolds' trickery, but, seemingly possessed, she has been able to speak with what Rowena and the boy Leopold recognize as Alicia's voice. So, while the whodunnit formula promotes the notion that Poirot is infallible, the film incorporates elements that challenge this. To put this another

way, Poirot's position may be atheistic, but the film's overall attitude is agnostic, since it stops short of debunking all of its ostensible instances of the paranormal and the final sequences refuse to close down the possibility that there is more in heaven and earth than Poirot can detect. In the dénouement, with the main mysteries solved, it may seem that the tension between his empiricism and the uncanny has been resolved in favour of the former, but this is far from clear-cut. Leopold tells Poirot that he may have solved the case, but he had help from the dead Alicia, and Ariadne says Poirot has 'the look of a believer', who has seen 'something', to which Poirot replies that he only knows that 'we cannot hide from our ghosts, whether they are real or not' (01.35.30 – 01.36.00), a concession to agnosticism that represents a shift in his position that is more in line with the film's overall stance.

So Gothic subverts the formal realism of the detective story, and arguably this has much to do with the relocation of the original novel amid the stones of Venice, in the improbable oxymoron of a great city, where the past remains visible as a vivid ocular proof of a bygone world that has survived to haunt the present. Venice, then, becomes a major protagonist in *A Haunting in Venice* in a way that neither the Orient Express nor the Nile steamer were in the earlier adaptations and one is left wanting to suggest that it is the phantasmagoric nature of the city itself that has prompted this different response from the film's director and screenwriter.

In one sense Daphne du Maurier's short story 'Don't Look Now' is less obviously generically Gothic. Narrated in the third person, its primary focalizer is the rationalist John, and the use of his consciousness as the medium through which events are seen has the effect of enlisting sympathy for his viewpoint. But, when the climax reveals that his sceptical attitude towards the paranormal has been mistaken, this viewpoint is discredited and readers have to reassess their view of what has occurred.

The barebones of the plot can be quickly summarized. John and his wife Laura (now with the surname Baxter) are in Venice, trying to come to terms with the loss of their five-year-old daughter, Christine, who has died of an illness. They encounter a strange pair of twin sisters, one of whom is blind and supposedly has psychic gifts. Laura is drawn to the blind twin and her claims that she is in contact with Christine; John thinks she is a fraud. The blind sister also warns that John is in serious danger if he stays in Venice. Laura returns to England when their other child, Johnnie, has an attack of appendicitis. John is to follow and is beginning his journey home, when he 'sees' Laura, who should now be in England, and the two sisters on a vaporetto on the Grand Canal. Seriously disturbed by this, he pursues a childlike figure, whom he links with his dead daughter, through the canals and back streets of Venice. Following this figure into a house, he discovers her true identity: she is a hideous female dwarf, a serial killer who has been responsible for other unsolved murders in the city and now she pierces his throat with a knife. In his dying moment, he undergoes an epiphany as he realizes that his vision of Laura and the two sisters on the vaporetto has been a premonition of his own funeral. The blind sister has said that he, too, is psychic and so it proves. Mystery turns to horror, as it becomes clear that Venice, with its unsettling conjunctions of different moments in

time, has been haunting him from the future, not the past.

Venice is, then, initially, the heterotopia to which John and Laura travel in the hope that it will bring them some kind of relief from the traumatic loss of Christine, which has particularly affected Laura. At first it seems to offer this, since Laura's mood changes when the psychic sister appears to be in contact with Christine. At the same time the sister says John is in danger in Venice and she enjoins him to leave. So Venice proves to be a heterotopia of another kind, a Gothic locale in which time is destabilized, horrific events hover nearby and the conventions of linear narrative are upended. If we read 'Don't Look Now' as a detective story, then it is John who takes on the role of detective when he tries to make sense of the puzzling appearance of Laura and the two sisters on the Grand Canal, and it is John who is doomed to become the future-tense victim – a literal victim since he is dying at the end and a figurative victim of his beliefs since his rationalist distrust of the paranormal is invalidated by the climax to the action. The Poirot of *A Haunting in Venice* is challenged by evidence of the paranormal; Du Maurier's 'Don't Look New' goes further, by coming down on the side of the uncanny precognition that John distrusts.

Nicolas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now* seizes on this aspect of the story and pushes it much further. John's vision of Laura and the sisters on the vaporetto remains central, but it is just one of a number of time-shifts, made possible by the expansion of the narrative in its transition from short story to full-length feature film and the use of cinematic analepses and prolepses, which make time and place seem particularly unstable throughout the action. The film opens with a powerful sequence, in which Christine dies from drowning in a pond at the family's English country home, not from illness as in the original story.[3] This opening sequence provides a more concrete background for the grief that John and Christine suffer from in Venice, and also initiates a series of leitmotifs, centred on the colour red and death by drowning. Christine is wearing a brightly coloured red plastic mac and in the later sequences where John is pursuing the dwarf in Venice, she has an almost identical coat. Similarly, Christine's death by drowning is echoed in Venice, when the bodies of the dwarf's previous victims are pulled from canals. Red is also prominent in another way in the opening sequence. John has accepted a commission to work on the restoration of a Venetian church, and is examining some slides of its interior, when he spills a glass of water, and a patch of red, which looks similar to Christine's mac, spreads across the image on one of the slides at the exact moment when Christine is drowning. However, this present-tense simultaneity is only part of what is being evoked. The spreading red also anticipates the way the colour will reappear throughout the film, particularly but not only in the form of the dwarf's red coat, and it prefigures John's own bloody death at the end. The instability of time is, then, present from the outset. Later, in Venice, there are similar instances of precognition for John. At one point in one of the back streets, he says 'I know this place' (*Don't Look Now*

[3] Johnnie is also a victim of a mishap rather than an illness: 'an accident during fire practice' (*Don't Look Now*, 00.55.09 – 10).

00.03.59 – 00.04.00), and it will turn out to be the spot where he will subsequently be killed.

The Gothic atmosphere is enhanced in the film, when the blind sister, Heather, tries to intercede with the dead Christine for Laura, and more generally the two sisters (no longer twins in the film version), particularly the disturbingly eerie Heather, conjure up a mood of menace, which is more immediate than in the story, because the audience sees them directly: through the camera's lens without the mediation of John's consciousness. Throughout there are flashbacks, particularly to the opening scenes, and in a tour de force of Hitchcockian editing, a love scene between John and Laura is presented in a series of short, staccato shots, which move between the sexual encounter and the couple's getting dressed immediately afterwards. The way in which this rapidly shifting montage moves backwards and forwards in time is a heightened instance of the temporal dislocations that are central to the whole film. And at the end there is a similar rapid montage, in which scenes from the whole movie come together and in so doing suggest the interconnected simultaneity of the whole action. 'Nothing is as it seems' (00.36.08 – 00.36.09) is a line spoken by John in the opening sequence, and in the first of the Venetian scenes, John tells Laura that the church which he is helping to restore[4] is a fake. What *is* 'as it seems' is an issue that runs throughout the film. The dwarf who seems to be an apparition of Christine is not Christine. John thinks Heather is a charlatan, but midway through the film he narrowly escapes a serious accident in the church where he is working and so before the conclusion there is evidence to suggest she is a genuine clairvoyant. John mentions to his employer, the bishop responsible for the church, that Heather has prophesized danger for him if he stays in Venice and the bishop says he wishes he did not have to believe in prophecy, so as in *A Haunting in Venice*, the particular circumstances of a seemingly uncanny occurrence prompt a theological response.

Like *A Haunting in Venice*, *Don't Look Now* is set in a Venice that is remote from the tourist brochures. It is a Venice of rat-infested canals and deserted back streets, a Venice with a mysterious serial killer, whose activities are not confined to a closed circle, at large. Again the predominant mood is Gothic, but while, like *A Haunting in Venice*, the film interrogates whether paranormal forces are at work, on a surface level, the streets and canals it depicts look very real and there is little of the stylized Gothic that informs the lighting, music and the sound effects of *A Haunting in Venice*. Music is used more sparingly, but very effectively and the score by Venetian composer Pino Donaggio, is notable for its haunting understated melodies and the manner in which it quietly builds tension towards the film's grotesque Gothic climax.

At first sight Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* is a far cry from the two films I been discussing, particularly because it is a superficially realistic novel, but it has affinities with the films, and its approach to Venice, which provides the setting for its second half, engages with similar issues. It is not overtly Gothic, but it nevertheless

[4] The church in question is the Chiesa di San Nicolò dei Mendicoli. It was actually being restored at the time (Scovell, 'Don't Look Now at 50').

represents Venice as a haunted site, a location suffused with the paranormal. The narrator-protagonist Dinanath ('Deen') Datta, is an antiquarian book dealer based in Brooklyn, who travels between West Bengal, locations on the east and west coasts of America and Venice. Deen is a self-styled 'rational, secular, scientifically minded person' (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 36). Like the Poirot of *A Haunting in Venice*, he is a man of mature years faced with the task of solving a mystery, and again as in *A Haunting in Venice*, this undertaking expands outwards to encompass a conflict between two opposed world-views: a scientifically verifiable view of experience and a view of existence in which paranormal happenings challenge the aura of realism that is uppermost in his meticulously realised mode of narration. When Deen first arrives in Venice he is a mine of information on aspects of the city's history and geography, and at points, as for example when he treats his readers to a paragraph on the distinctiveness of the Cannaregio sestiere of Venice, he diverges into the provision of circumstantial information that is not necessary to the plot but serves to support the illusion of transferred actuality that is a lynch-pin of fictional realism.[5] Deen emphasizes that he is 'not religious and [does not] believe in the supernatural' (36), but, as his narrative unfolds, he finds himself increasingly confronted with logically inexplicable phenomena that trouble his nervous disposition. So, as with the Poirot of *A Haunting in Venice*, the quest to solve a particular mystery, in this case the location of the enigmatic gun island of the title, which he has come across in a medieval legend about a travelling Merchant, while back in Bengal in the first part of the novel, becomes entangled with larger existential issues.[6]

The first half of the novel is peppered with events that reflect the impact of global warming, and in the Venetian-set second half, Deen's encounters with climate disturbance intensify. In a chapter entitled 'High Water',[7] he and his friend Professor Giacinta (Cinta) Schiavon experience the kind of flooding that has particularly affected the city in recent decades, and when Cinta tells Deen that shipworms are hollowing away at the wooden pilings on which Venice is built, 'literally eating the foundations of the city' (251), the inference is that global warming is causing a species to migrate and this is upsetting a finely balanced ecosystem. However, not all the changes that Deen experiences in Venice and subsequently on the Mediterranean, are occurring in such a gradual and superficially imperceptible way and, in the novel's action-filled climax, Venice is assaulted by extreme winds and hailstones, followed by a 'shimmering, mirage-like fog' (268). The conclusion, where a series of freak tornadoes descend on the Venetian lagoon, and the whole of Italy is said to be affected by various kinds of strange weather, takes this to another level. Intense storms are common in Gothic fiction. Here

[5] See Barthes 1968.
[6] Parts of my discussion of *Gun Island* are closely related to my treatment of the Venetian sections of the novel in Thieme, *Anthropocene Realism*, particularly pp. 143-150, though my main emphasis there is on the novel's challenge to conventional notions of realism.
[7] From the Italian 'Acqua Alta', the standard term used to refer to the periods when Venice floods.

the trope is magnified several times over.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Deen has just happened to be on hand when meteorological calamities have occurred and this may stretch the bounds of credulity, but one way of responding to this is to say that anthropogenic climate change is itself an unnatural occurrence, which stretches the boundaries of what we expect to encounter in a realist novel. So, by the end, one has to concede that *Gun Island* is not simply a realist novel, but rather a novel which, among other things, debates what kind of fictional discourse is appropriate for narrativizing the new global situation, in which climate change, intercontinental migration and digital technology are reshaping the world as we know it, or rather as we thought we knew it. Through the medium of Deen, Ghosh is telling the story of a changing planet and his representation of Venice plays a central part in this. And, as in *A Haunting in Venice* and *Don't Look Now*, the unnaturalness of climate change is complemented by numerous instances of what Deen perceives as paranormal events.

Gun Island is awash with uncanny incidents, many of which involve precognition, as with the central peripeteia in *Don't Look Now*. Cinta, who has had preternatural foreknowledge of her husband and daughter's death in a car crash just before it happened and who throughout the novel recurrently senses her deceased daughter Lucia's presence, is a firm believer in this manifestation of the paranormal. Other instances of precognition are particularly associated with the Bengali character of Tipu, who appears to be an intercessor between worlds when he messages Deen in Brooklyn to ask him the meaning of the word *bhuta* and, in the Internet conversation that follows, elicits a complicated reply that opens up a portal on issues that are central to the novel. Deen explains that *bhuta* comes from a Sanskrit word that 'simply means "a being" or "an existing presence"' (114), but when Tipu pushes him further, he concedes that animals, snakes and dolphins can also be included as 'beings' and that the word can carry the sense of 'ghost', because it can refer to '"a past state of being"' (115). It becomes a seminal word in the decoding of the mystery of the ancient Bengali legend, because it breaks down the distinction between human and non-human animals and it also collapses the distance between past and present. Deen is exasperated when Tipu asks him if he believes in ghosts, but agrees that it suggests that the present is haunted by the past. At this point in the novel their conversation may seem to be incidental, but it underlies much of the action, which increasingly suggests that the present is permeated by the past, particularly since it will transpire that Deen is following in the legendary Merchant's footsteps in travelling to Venice.

So again Venice proves to be a site that disrupts normal linear time progressions. While one may argue that all places contain traces of their past and seeds of their future, the particular temporal situation of Venice, where the physical past is visible in its buildings seems to have encouraged artists to see it as a site, which, if not exactly atemporal, promotes slippage between past, present and future. Deen has the growing conviction that 'these unlikely encounters, these improbable intersections between the past and the present' (201), which he is experiencing, are part of a pattern in which his

own life has been determined by forces from the mythical past. In short, his encounters with climate change and the apparently paranormal become part of a larger pattern, and the novel stages a debate as to whether contingent 'chance' lies behind the action or whether 'hidden forces' are controlling what happens to Deen. The latter possibility is lent credence by revelations that emerge in the course of his quest to decode the meaning of the legend in which the Merchant has travelled to Gun Island. On a formal level, this blurs distinctions between fabulation and realism.

Just as Poirot is subject to hallucinations, when Deen, in his room in Venice, sees a brown recluse spider, a species not native to Venice, but which, like several other creatures in the novel, has changed its habitat as a result of global warming, he is disturbed to the point where he feels he is losing his will. Cinta persuades him that what this represents is an induction into a different view of consciousness, and it gradually becomes clear that the crux of this awakening involves a movement away from the Anthropocene to an animist view of the world, a view in which he comes to reverse his initial understanding of the legend of the Merchant.

Deen is ushered into a new vision of experience and, bibliophile that he is, his awakening is also played out in terms of his response to the various books he encounters during the course of his travels. In Venice, he initially feels he should be reading *The Aspern Papers*, a work that also deals with a literary quest, but he eventually abandons this idea on the grounds that James's novella does not resonate with either the Venice of the Gun Merchant or the Venice that he is currently encountering. The missing elements seem to be its lack of improbable connections and the capacity to envisage other worlds. Two other books take Deen in an opposite direction. Putting *The Aspern Papers* aside, he picks up a copy of Emilio Salgari's *I misteri della giungla nera* (*The Mystery of the Black Jungle*) (1895), an Italian children's classic that he has not known about until Cinta has mentioned it to him. The cover depicts a tiger stalking some turbaned men, and he is surprised to find that it is set in the Sundarbans region of Bengal, which he has visited in the first part of the novel. Inside the book, on the first page, he finds the name of Cinta's dead daughter Lucia, and since Lucia has been a presence, a *bhuta*, sensed by both her mother and others after her death, the effect is not only to bring different worlds together, but also to elide the difference between past and present, the supposedly normal and the paranormal.

The other book that Deen encounters, which contains what he sees as a completely different world-view to *The Aspern Papers*, is the rare incunabulum, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, which he sees in the Querini Stampalia library and which he is able to read in a late sixteenth-century translation, *The Strife of Love in a Dreame*. It is a romance told by a man who goes in search of his absent beloved and is transported into a forest, where he finds himself 'surrounded by savage animals – wolves, bears and hissing serpents'. He loses himself in a dream-within-a-dream, where he is assaulted by voices emanating 'from beings of all sorts – animals, trees, flowers, spirits . . .' (227; ellipsis in original). So, the discourse involved is pre-Enlightenment and, like Salgari's *Mystery of the Black Jungle*, it belongs to the realms of fable. What is most uncanny in this instance, though, is

Deen's feeling that *he himself* is lost in the dream, and he says he is *being* dreamed by 'creatures whose very existence was fantastical to me – spiders, cobras, sea snakes – and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other's dreams' (227). So dream supersedes reality in a vision, in which non-human species have equal agency with humans, and more generally the pre-Enlightenment, and non-Western texts challenge the primacy of the Anthropocene.

There is little of the schlock horror of much contemporary Gothic, but if one sees Gothic as a mode that opens up a space for the expression of dreams and fantasy, which was the case in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fictional iterations of the genre, it is very possible to find Gothic elements, which subvert the norms of realist fiction, in *Gun Island*, in much the same way as novelists such as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliff and Mary Shelley challenged the supposed verisimilitude of much eighteenth-century fiction. For them, the Gothic was a state of mind, as much internal as external.

As is often the case in Ghosh's work, extraordinary parallels between events on different continents that have occurred in different periods of history and have been written about in different genres of writing[8] suggest an underlying humanism: not the anthropocentric liberal humanism of the West, but rather a humanism that is an outcrop of age-old Bengali traditions that prove to have striking resonance in the contemporary global world. In short, then, *Gun Island* takes the challenge to realism and scientific rationalism further than either version of *Don't Look Now* or the film *A Haunting in Venice*. Venice is particularly brought into dialogue with the Sundarbans region of Bengal where episodes in the first part of the novel are set, and in the end it proves to be central, not just somewhere that Deen fetches up in his search to discover the meaning of the Merchant's quest and the identity of the gun island of the legend. It turns out to be the goal of the quest, because the gun island is itself Venice. Early on, Deen has come across an image of two concentric circles on the facade of a Sundarbans shrine, which supposedly holds the key to the identity of Gun Island as an island within an island and its meaning now becomes clear. The image does not refer to a place in the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean, but to Venice, where the inner circle encloses the island of the ghetto, which is, of course, enclosed by the island of Venice. Later it becomes clear that Tipu is following a similar route to the West. So past and present come together and two levels of discourse are conflated. Both Deen's and Tipu's experience, are intricately intertwined with the mythical journey of the Merchant. When Deen has earlier returned to Brooklyn, after visiting the shrine in the Sundarbans, he has felt that he has emerged from 'some submerged aspect of time' (113), but there is no escape from what he has tried to pass off as 'an extended hallucination' (110). The two worlds are synchronous; the states of mind that he believes they engender are not discrete and the suggestion, which comes first from Tipu and subsequently from Cinta, is that Deen's body is possessed.

So, as in *Don't Look Now* and *A Haunting in Venice*, Venice is pervaded by the paranormal and this destabilizes the rationalist protagonist's mindset. Poirot in *A*

[8] See Thieme, 'Amitav Ghosh and the Exclusivism of Empire', 2014.

Haunting in Venice, John in both versions of *Don't Look Now,* and Deen in *Gun Island* are all confronted with a Venice that challenges the logic of linear time sequences, the dividing line between the normal and paranormal, and notions of literary realism and rationalist thought more generally. Intersections of time and space, in which a site is related to two or more periods invariably contain a potential challenge to seeing place as 'singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity', but arguably Venice, with its unique geography embodies the mobility of place in an acute form. The texts I have been discussing, with their focus on precognition, time-shifts and the paranormal, all propose a Gothic Venice, in which a discrete, immobile vision of the city is unsustainable.

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